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ABSTRACT

Developments in linguistics, particularly in Europe in the work of T.A. Van Dijk, a broader conception of texts that shows promise for the study of reading. Textlinguistics covers a domain of linguistics studies that are involved with texts. Textlinquists are interested not only in those obvious immediate connecting mechanisms, such as anaphora, that link one statement or proposition to another, but also in the larger elements of organization that make up a text. Until now most attention has been paid to the sentence as a unit of meaning; but for a fuller understanding of the effects of larger units within a unified framework, a variety of linkages and forms must be perceived and processed by the reader. Some of the topics within text grammars are corefe entiality, pronominalization, tense and time reference, local reference, and semantic relations between sentences. The order and sequencing of sentences within a text give coherence, but they only recently have received systematic attention in the domain of textlinquistics. These developments offer insights into the teaching of reading comprehension. (MKM)

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Some Developments in Textlinguistics: Implications for the teacher of reading

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Some Developments in Textlinguistics : implications for the Teacher of Reading

Some fifteen years ago, the American linguist Kenneth Pike (1964) wrote, "A bias of mine - not shared by many linguists - is the convinction that beyond the sentence lie grammatical structures available to linguistic analysis, describable by technical procedures, and usable by the author for the generation of the literary works through which he reports to us his observations". Few followed this 'bias' by a methodical study of those 'grammatical structures beyond the sentence' until a decade later and mostly on another continent. This resistence of going beyond the sentence as a unit of study has been most marked among American and British linguists.

During the years intervening Pike's statement of his 'bias' and now, the domination of the sentence as the maximum size of unit for grammatical analysis has grown and according to some, assumed almost magical properties. In this Chomsky's pronouncements on the theory of syntax has acted as a powerful reinforcement for linguistic analytical studies remaining at the level of the sentence: it also has had the effect of concentrating on linguistic form and neglecting usage.

The position is paradoxical for other studies than those of the grammarians, like stylistics, poetics, rhetoric and narrative theory, have demonstrated over the years that there are regularities amounting to rules in texts which are composed of more than one sentence. The cross-cultural linguist Grimes (1978) for instance

said, "We say most of what we say in strings of sentences, but not in random strings of sentences. There are processes at work in language that restrict later sentences in terms of earlier ones, and large scale structures within which individual sentences play their part".

Indeed, the meaning of some stretches of language can only be understood through the relationships that exist between more than one sentence (van Dijk, 1978). Being linguistically restricted to the sentence has presented teachers and students of the reading process with problems for as has been maintained elsewhere, (Chapman, 1978): you cannot read without a text: a text is language presented in its written or visible mode and the study of language is very much the province of linguists. If many linguists restrict themselves and their theories to the sentence, no matter how important the grammar of that unit may be, the study of reading is less than well served. After all, most of the texts which teachers present to children to read consist of more than one sentence. This and the requirement of pupils to compose texts in schools makes a study of the grammatical structures beyond the sentence a basic necessity, and yet sadly such a study had remained outside British main-stream linguistics, and no unified theory of complete texts has yet been produced.

A further ramification for the teaching of reading caused by this 'gap', is the lack of relationship and continuity between the teacher of reading in the early stages and that required in the secondary school. Here, linguistic models might well have provided the missing theoretical framework within which the work of the teacher of beginning reading and the English specialist teacher in the Secondary School could share an understanding.

In Britain, one work that looks at the properties of texts from a global perspective stands out. This is the work of Halliday and Hasan (1976) who supply an inventory of those linguistic mechanisms that create cohesion (or unity) in texts. This characteristic of cohesion is said to bind the text together into a meaningful unit, i.e. to give it semantic unity. It has been shown that some of these linguistic mechanisms play a part in the development of fluent reading (Chapman, 1979 (a) and (b)).

Other linguists, particularly those in Europe, having a different tradition from that in Britain and America, had dared to step beyond the 'magical' boundary of the sentence to investigate the grammatical structures referred to earlier by Kenneth Pike. In Europe, Textlinguistics, an anglicised version of the German : Textlinguistik is being established and has begun to show sufficient progress for us to be able to talk now of its developments and ask in what way these studies might begin to inform a study of the reading process.

It is probably wise at the outset to state the limits of textlinguistics for although some major problems are being resolved it is only at an early formative stage. If the ground is cleared a little in this way, delegates will be in a better position to appreciate the implications for reading of some textlinguistic features and at the same time their expectations will not be unduly raised.

There is a need in these discussions to disambiguate some of the terms in current use for the approach to textlinguistics followed here is not that of one linguistic theory but of a domain of linguistic studies which focus on the text. It is as van Dijk (1978) puts it, "the kind of scholarly activity in which texts are studies with (all kinds of) linguistic tools". And again, "from the labels and general domain of 'textlinguistics' and

'text grammar'...we are not talking about a specific method or theory in linguistics but about a domain, focus or collection of problems being studied in addition to those of classical sentence grammars and linguistics". It should be noted that the movement in Europe being discussed is characterized by such names as Petöfi, van Dijk, Dressler and others (see Dressler, 1978) Some of the words used by these European scholars as technical textlinguistic terms are in everyday use in Britain and vice versa. In the interests of both clarity and international understanding the definitions of Teun van Dijk (1978) will be followed and our usage restricted to these to avoid confusion.

1.0 Implied within the term Textlinguistics (and/or Text Grammar which is often used synonymously) is the notion of applying systematic linguistic analyses beyond the sentence to continuous texts. (It is interesting to note how often we have to use adjectives like 'continuous' or 'extended' when speaking of texts, when nearly always in reading we should be able to take it for granted that texts are complete and of some length).

2.0 The textlinguistic analyses that are proposed do not involve more than linguistic analyses and descriptions however, as they do not reach into fields traditionally the province of other disciplines, e.g. psychology and sociology, so we have to look to interdisciplinary studies for text processing or comprehension as these involve performance. Communication, whether through written or spoken texts, requires the study of features other than linguistic description : a factor that is readily acknowledged by van Dijk

and others who see the textlinguistic contribution as one component of an interdisciplinary study. For instance, van Dijk has co-operated with Walter Kintsch in an experiment in recalling and summarising stories (van Dijk and Kintsch W. 1977).

3.0 A third point, which is related to the first, is the problem mentioned earlier that surrounds the intuitive or everyday use of words that are technical terms elsewhere.

3.1 For instance, the word 'text' itself is often used to convey more than linguistic description; when we think of texts in teaching we are usually concerned with comprehension where cognitive factors are obviously involved. In this paper for clarity and consistency the term textlinguistic (or text grammar) will be restricted to the linguistic description and analysis of texts. This enables the text itself to be differentiated from performance factors, hopefully avoiding some of the competence/performance debate.

3.2 Another terminological distinction needs to be made espeically in a paper put before an international audience. This relates to the differences that exist in the usage of the word 'discourse' by different nationalities. We have already indicated that the word 'text' will be used to refer only to the linguistic description; on the other hand 'discourse' is a general term like that covered by the German :Textwissenschoff. This relates to discourse studies, of which text grammar is but a component. Misunderstanding might arise here for in England we often use the word 'discourse' when German, Dutch and Scandinavians use 'text'. In Britain, for example, the use of collocations like 'spoken text' does not come

as readily perhaps as 'spoken discourse'. Following van Dijk and adopting his practice as before, the term discourse is retained to embrace interdisciplinary fields of study.

3.2.1 One further distinction needs to be made in the use of the words 'discourse' and 'text' when related to the spoken or written modes. Often 'discourse' is taken as referring to spoken conversations and 'text' to the written or printed modes. However, some linguists , e.g. Halliday and Hasan (ibid) use text to apply to both spoken and written stretches of language. Here , whilst Halliday and Hasan's conceptualisation of 'texture' will be used, text will refer to the written or printed version, and discourse reserved for spoken langauge.

What then are the arguments that allow us to move into the comparatively new scene of textlinguistics or text grammar? Teun van Dijk (1978) puts forward three types of argument, theoretical, empirical and applicability for establishing textlinguistics, and each of these arguments are persuasive for the student of reading. In summary they are that, theoretically, "certain structures of sentences can only be accounted for in the framework of an account of text structures..... An empirical argument would claim that a linguistic account of language utterances cannot be adequate in terms of an analysis of isolated sentences alone..... and finally, that language users know and use rules, categories etc. underlying such structures". When these arguments are followed, those studying the process of reading will find themselves in agreement with the perspective, for reading requires an underpinning theory of the structure of complete texts and any study that spells

out the nature of these structures is clearly of benefit. It is obvious also that observations of reading involve much more than isolated sentences, and that learner readers come to know, often without instruction, those rules, categories etc- that are applicable to texts. If then these are the basic arguments for moving towards a new perspective, such insights that the textlinguist can bring are also likely to be of pedagogical importance to the teacher of reading.

It is necessary to recall what was said earlier that is that textlinguistics covers a domain of linguistic studies that are involved with texts. Textlinguists are not only interested in those obvious immediate connecting mechanisms, such as anaphora that link one statement or proposition in a text to another, but also in the larger elements of organisation that make up a text. Until now hardly any attention has been paid to the effects of such larger units within a unified framework, and yet for a fuller understanding, a variety of linkages and forms must be perceived and processed by the reader. Various recent studies have been concerned with the way in which prose is organised and its effect on memory, (e.g. Meyer 1975, Thorndike 1977, Rumelhart 1975), but the relationship of the mechanisms that link the smaller micro-units to the larger macro-structures has been missing. But what are these structures and how might they be taken into account by the teacher of reading? To give an idea of the scope: some of the topics within text grammars are "co-referentiality, pronominalization, tense and time reference, local reference, semantic relations

between sentences, topic comment etc" (Dressler, 1978) p.11).

There is a great deal of work to be done to compose a text grammar that will be robust enough for the applications required by the teacher of reading, and some might say that it is premature to begin empirical work on the outlines we have so far. However, much of the effort that is taking place in studies of reading at present is often of isolated features with little real attempt at linguistic unification. It is to be hoped that in textlinguistics a carefully articulated theoretical framework will emerge within which much research can be undertaken in a systematic and related fashion.

One of the abilities of skilled readers that gives credence to textlinguistic arguments is that they (skilled readers) can judge with little difficulty a text from a non-text. That is to say they can tell intuitively whether a text is complete and connected or not. This is easily demonstrated by making copies of a text, leaving one intact and mutilating the others by upsetting in random fashion the order of the words and sentences that compose them. When asked to read these randomly arranged strings of sentences, most readers will quickly agree that the collection that has not been disturbed is a text, the rest are not texts. This

is fairly straightforward, but what is more important is that, if the mutilated texts have the order or sequences of their sentences disturbed to a lesser or greater extent, skilled readers can usually tell which comes nearer to being a text, and which is least like a text. In other words readers can not only detect a text from a non-text, but judge the amount of orderliness or cohesion present (Barnard, 1974). Furthermore, most skilled readers can re-arrange the words and sentences of a mutilated text in the order intended by its author. The perception of texts therefore involves not only awareness of its constituent parts, but also the global structure within which cohesion or coherence occur.

It is clear then that one detectable characteristic of texts is orderliness. The term given to this is coherence or cohesion. Coherence is said to be created whenever the base units (groups of words or sentences), are taken within a theme in an ordered fashion and in completed sequences. The order of words within sentences, syntax, has been well documented by linguists working within the sentence boundary and will not be dealt with here, but the order and sequencing of sentences within a text such as give rise to coherence, has only recently received systematic attention within the domain of textlinguistics and is one of its main tenents.

One of the first linguists to formulate what has been called the coherence problem was Bierwisch (Reiser, 1977, p.7). However he didn't put forward any proposals that would help to solve the problem of coherence which was (and still is) to specify what mechanisms are at work in texts to achieve it. Van Dijk (1977)

has given a detailed linguistic explication of the ways in which coherence is achieved and what is just as important to the teacher of reading, what the cognitive implications are. Van Dijk (1977) posits that coherence is a semantic property of discourse, such that each individual sentence is interpreted relative to the interpretation of other sentences. One aspect of coherence being achieved by connectives, the immediate, pairwise relations between subsequent proposition taken as 'wholes'.

It should be recalled that most linguists give us a linguistic description of the text only but the teacher of reading has to consider both the text and the reader. For example, comprehension, which has always been given a high priority by teachers, involves what readers gain from their reading of a text. Modern approaches to comprehension have seen it as a process and not a product. Teachers used to give their pupils a series of comprehension tests using them as indicators of understanding and progress, but now it is the process that engages attention. A recent definition for instance states that "Comprehension is..... a series of processes that the reader uses to abstract meaning (semantic structure) from discourse. This can be seen as a series of steps by which the reader creates a memorial structure for the text that directly reflects the semantic structure of that text" (Marshall and Glock 1978/79 p.48). Van Dijk and his colleagues look like coming very close indeed to specifying the linguistic mechanism at work in a text which produce those semantic structures, and in such a way that the reader can abstract the meaning from the text.

The cohesive ties of Halliday and Hasan are also thought of as having a similar integrative function giving the text semantic unity. This is achieved by a series of linguistic mechanisms which are described in traditional linguistic terms rather than those of logic. Coherence, on the other hand, is defined rather differently employing the use of logical semantics. "In linguistics, the meaning of a declarative sentence is often called a proposition ..... in the semantics of (propositional) logical systems, a proposition is simply defined as an object which is assigned a truth-value" (van Dijk 1977 p.21).

These semantic propositions, or micro-structures, combine in compound propositions and sequences of propositions which in turn can be mapped into more global structures such as the topic of the conversation (or text). Van Dijk (1977) shows how the micro-structures can be related to macro-structures of texts by means of macro-rules. Four such rules have been provisionally distinguished, Deletion, Generalization, Selection and Construction. The macro-structure can be dominated by super-structure, like narrative, which are not the same as the semantic macro-structures. Categories like narrative, are based on more general formulations taken from the theory of action and action description. In these, consideration is also given to frames of conventional knowledge which, as context, must figure in any global formulation. Here the account comes close to Register which is the other major area of consideration in the model of Halliday and Hasan who, whilst they give a series of linguistic mechanisms for the achievement of Cohesion, are more reticent as to Register. Van Dijk (1977) on the other hand emphasises the importance of pragmatics which involves a ready

appreciation of contextual features.

It can be seen from the foregoing examples that developments in linguistics, particularly in Europe, have moved towards a broader conception of texts which shows promise for the study of reading. Much more attention has been paid to insights given by semantics through the topic of propositions and pragmatics.

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